DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 181 886 CS 005 232

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TITLE A Primer of Black English for Informal Reading Inventory Error/Miscue Analysis.
PUB DATE [78]
NOTE 17p.; Monograph prepared for the Trenton Public Schools

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Dialects; Elementary Education; *Informal Reading Inventory; *Miscue Analysis; *Oral Reading; *Reading Diagnosis; Reading Instruction; Reading Tests

ABSTRACT

This paper provides information on black English to be used by teachers as they score errors and miscues on the oral part of informal reading inventories. The information is presented in order for teachers to understand items spoken in black English that are equivalents to standard English and that when spoken would indicate understanding of the material rather than mistakes. Background information on the use of black English as a viable language is given. Aspects of black English that are explained and for which examples are given are pronunciation, the consonant clusters, the "r" and "l" sounds, consonant reversal, and diphthong simplification; grammatical endings; verbal forms; and question formation. Nonstandard features also found in other dialects are briefly noted. (HKM)

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A Primer of Black English for Informal Reading Inventory Error/Miscue Analysis

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The Informal Reading Inventory (IRI) is a much used, powerful diagnostic instrument which not only records deviations from the text but also classifies them into such categories as omissions, insertions, substitutions, repititions, and reversals. This process enables the teacher to identify specific reading deficiencies and plan their remediation. In addition formulas based on the student's proficiency in word recognition and comprehension enable the teacher to determine his proper independent, instructional, and frustrational reading levels.

While directions for these inventories are quite explicit in how to categorize and note a student's errors, very little explanation is given on exactly what constitutes an error. Basically this seemingly trivial decision is left to the professional judgment of the reading teacher. Any deviation from acceptable speech patterns of American English, or more specifically from the teacher's perceptions of this form of speech, is generally judged to be an error.

Woods and Moe (1977) make the distinction between error and miscue. They define the latter as any deviation from the text; however, it is not to be counted as an error unless it changes the meaning. For example, they state that a student's reading of the as a is not an error, but his reading of the as think would be considered one.

While there is logic to their distinction, they fail to discuss the problem of a student who deviates from the text but who is reading according to the rules of his dialect, a dialect different from standard English (SE), Gilliland (1978) does state that any changes in pronunciation and sentence structure caused by dialectal interference should not be considered errors. This is not to say that they should not be corrected eventually; what he is saying is that a form which systematically differs from comparable form in SE should not be counted as an error in the initial diagnosis since such internalizing of the passage is a sign of a proficient reading process as opposed to a letter by letter or word by word decoding process.

Such a warning, while well-intentioned and pedagogically and linguistically sound, is of little value if the teacher does not know the features of the dialect with which he is in contact. Perhaps the dialect most commonly found in today's schools which deviates from SE is Black English (BE). It is the purpose of this work to make teachers, especially those involved in reading, aware of its phonological, morphological, and syntactical features so they can diagnose the reading problems of its speakers more intelligently.

Since many of these teachers have little knowledge of linguistics in general and in sociolinguistics in particular, I will attempt to describe the features of BE as accurately as possible without inundating the writing with technical jargon. The linguistic distinctions made and the technical

words used are necessary both to understand what is happening and why and also to allow the individual teacher to pursue the subject in more technically oriented material.

Perhaps the first priority should be to clear up some prevalent misconceptions concerning the nature and structure of BE.

While even the casual observer notices that BE is indeed differnet from SE, he must be careful not to confuse difference with deficit. In spite of statements made by such noted educational psychologists as Carl Bereiter and Siegfried Englemann (1966) that BE is a grammarless form of speech, limited in structure to giant words, and lacking even names for common nouns, BE is linguistically a legitimate form of language capable of making most grammatical distinctions found in SE and even some which are not.

Those shortsighted enough to think BE lacks words for abstract concepts go on to make the next illogical step that speakers of BE are incapable of thinking abstractly, whatever that may mean. As evidence for this position, such authorities as Jensen (1973) cite the fact that blacks, on the average, perform poorer than whites on IQ tests without realizing, or stating, that these tests, as Gunnarsson (1978) points out, are to a large extent testing verbal proficiency in SE as well as experiences familiar to middle and upper class white Americans.

Even the Wepman Test of Auditory Discrimination is culturally biased because it is based on the phonemic distinctions of SE. Its explicit purpose is to test the sound distinctions functioning in SE, and these are not always the same as those of BE.

For example, in the Wepman Test, Form II, the student is supposed to tell the examiner if the words wreath and reef are the same or different. While most English speakers can easily distinguish the voiceless th sound ending the first word from the f sound ending the second, many speakers of BE fail to make this distinction because in BE final voiceless th often becomes f; thus both words above would be pronounced as reef. This seeming inability to hear is not auditory in such cases, rather it is sociolinguistic. It is no different from the inability of most Trentonians and New Yorkers to hear the differences between which and witch and hoarse and horse. Indeed most people from these cities would wonder what these differences are.

Contrary to the belief that black children are not verbal, those familiar with their culture and speech have found that while some youngsters may be quiet in the unfamiliar surroundings of school, they do in fact like to talk and verbality is highly prized in the black community. While it is true that blacks generally favor less complex sentences and use fewer abstract terms than do whites, their dialect is not inferior. As Basil Bernstein (1964) points out love of complexity and jargon may itself be culturally determined.

BE, a rural Southern dialect brought to Northern urban centers, is linguistically a legitimate form of speech. However, all must be aware that it can be a block to social, academic and economic mobility. It should be remembered that the goal of a language arts program should be to teach these youngsters

an alternate dialect, namely SE, so they can use it in appropriate social situations. While teaching this alternate dialect, the teacher must never downgrade the student's first dialect. This ability to use two dialects is known as bidialectalism. Although the research is meager in this area, some believe, see Bousquet (1974), that it may be more difficult to learn a second dialect than a second language because of the interference of one form of speech on another very similar in structure.

Uniformity of BE

While BE is quite uniform in structure throughout the United States, it is not monolithic. Not all blacks use all of its features. Even those who use a given feature do not use it 100% of the time. Generally the frequency of its features is influenced by age, sex, education, and social situation. The young use BE features more than the adults, with the highest incidence of the features being found in the speech of adolescents. Males tend to use these features more frequently than do females. The less educated use them more frequently than the more educated. Finally the less formal the social situation, the more frequently their occurrence; similarly these features tend to be more frequent in speech than in writing.

It is, therefore, important for the reading teacher to listen to the speech of his students in informal situations, such as in recess and during play periods,

Anyone familiar with American speech will notice that some BE features are also found in other regional and/or social dialects. For simplicity sake, I have generally not noted these other occurrences, but it suffices to say that it is the combination of these features which distinguishes BE.

Pronunciation: Consonant Clusters

Consonants in English fall into two general categories-voiced and voiceless. In the formation of the former, the vocal cords vibrate while in the latter they do not vibrate. Try pronouncing the first sound in bin and the first sound in pin; do not pronounce the vowels or the name of the letters because in doing so you will produce voiced sounds in both instances. These sound, b and p, are produced the same way, with the two lips stopping the air flow for a short period, but the vocal cords vibrate for the first and not the second. If you put your finger over your larynx or Adam's apple, you can feel this vibration.

This distinction in important because in BE if two consonants end a word, both of which are voiced or voiceless, and the second is a stop consonant (b-p, d-t, g-k), the latter can be dropped. Thus we get the following homonyms:

past-pass	wind-win
West-Wes	told-toll
test-Tess	hold-hole
rift-riff	cold-coal
	mend-men

Such reductions are found in colloquial, white, middle class speech if the next word begins with a consonant, as in col'cuts and tes'paper. However, in BE these reductions are made even if the next word begins with a vowel, as in wes' end and ol' apple or if the word itself appears before a pause, as in history tes'.

TH Sounds

There are two th sounds in English. The first, a voiced sound, is the initial sound in thy whilethe second, its voiceless counterpart, is the initial sound in thigh.

These sounds have parallel alternations in BE. At the beginning of words, the voiced th is regularly replaced by d, a voiced sound, as when then is pronounced den. Similarly the voiceless th is replaced by t, a voiceless sound, as when thin becomes tin.

At the end of words, the voiced th becomes v, a voiced sound, as when breathe is pronounced breave. The voiceless th is replaced by f, a voiceless sound, as when Ruth and death become roof and deaf respectively. These same substitutions are made when the th sounds are bordered by vowels, as when brother becomes brova and author is pronounced ahfuh. (The loss of r in these words will be discussed later.)

If the voiceless th is followed by an r, the th becomes f as when three becomes free.

R and L Sounds

These sounds act in distinctive yet similar ways in BE. While both are pronounced at the beginning of a word, both become a schwa (the first sound in above and the last in sofa) or are not pronounced at the end of a word, as in sister becoming sistuh and nickel becoming nickuh. The following homonyms are found in BE:

nor-gnaw	toll-toe
sore-saw	tool-too
par-pa	all-awe
	Saul-saw

Likewise both are lost when they precede a consonant, as in court becoming caught and help becoming hep. Such homonyms as the following are thus produced:

guard-god	fault-fought
fort-fought	
card-cod	

Generally the r-less pronunciation is acceptable throughout the eastern seaboard while the l-less pronunciation is found only parts of the South.

Nasals

A common feature of BE, as well as informal varieties of SE, is the substitution of n for what is generally termed the -ng sound, as in walkin' for walking.

The vowel contrast between pin and pen and tin and ten is lost or neutralized before n; thus, pin would be heard for the first pair and tin for the second.

Miscellaneous

The consonants sk in ask are often reversed, producing what sounds like axe (aks).

Some diphthongs (two vowel sounds pronounced is succession making only one syllable as in boy) become simple vowels as when boil and oil are pronounced ball and all respectively and when side is pronounced sod.

Grammatical Endings

A process akin to the consonant simplification rule described above accounts for the loss of many inflections in BE.

Three inflections in SE, namely the plural, the possessive, and the third person, singualar, present tense marker, although different in meaning, have similar formation rules. Generally these rules are as follows:

1.) if a word ends in a voiceless sound, an s, another voiceless sound, is added to the word. Thus in SE we find two socks, Frank's house and he walks.

2.) if a word ends in a voiced sound, a z, itself a voiced sound, is added to it, producing two dogs, a man's house, and he runs.

3.) if a word ends in a sibilant, such as -s, -z, -sh,-ch, and -j), a vowel resembling a schwa plus a -z are added, as in two roses, the judge's chambers, and he rushes.

In BE any formation following the first or second rule may be simplified by dropping the -s or -z sound because the new formation would end in a voiced or voiceless consonant cluster.

Consequently it is not uncommon to hear the following forms in BE:

two cat	Frank house	he walk
two dog	a man house	he run

This simplification is not, however, always present. Besides the occurrence of the usual SE forms, BE speakers sometimes overcorrect or hypercorrect these forms producing the following:

two mens	Jack's Smith's car	I walks
two foots	Jack's Smith car	you runs

It is also common to find words ending in a consonant cluster in SE which are simplified in BE to end in a sibilant, such as desk becoming des, to be inflected according to rule 3 above. Thus in BE the plural form of the SE desk would be deses.

Another common pronunciation is found in the word test, which keeps its final -t contrary to rule 1 above but is made plural according to rule 3, thus giving testes.

It is interesting to note that in the speech of some BE speakers, do and say which require a vowel change for the third singular, present tense, not indicated in the spelling, in addition to the usual ending, lack even this vowel change.

The consonant cluster simplification rule is also responsible, at least in part, for the loss of the past tense marker, usually written -ed. The past tense inflection is similar in structure to the plural, possessive, and third singular, present tense marker just described. More specifically the rules for its

formation in SE are:

1.) if a word ends in a voiceless sound, other than -t, a -t sound, itself voiceless, is added; walk plus -ed is pronounced walkt.

2.) if a word ends in a voiced sound, other than -d, a -d, itself a voiced sound, is added; call plus -ed is pronounced calld.

3.) if a word ends in a -t or -d sound, an -id is added; add plus -ed is pronounced addid and act plus -ed is pronounced actid.

Many speakers of BE delete the -t or -d sounds described in rules 1 and 2 above, thus producing He walk yesterday.

Verbal Forms

The progressive tenses in SE, those in which the verb forms end in -ing as in is walking and was walking, are formed with the addition of an auxiliary or helping verb. SE also allows these helping verbs to be contracted, as in he's walking. BE carries this process one step further by allowing these contracted helping verbs to be deleted, as in he walkin'.

A similar deletion in BE is found where SE has permissible contracted forms of the verb to be, as:

She's good. SE	He's here. SE
She good. BE	He here. BE

The future tense auxiliary (wi)ll can also be lost in BE as explained in the pronunciation section under loss of l. Thus I'll be here would be I be here in BE.

BE has three other distinctive verbal formations using be, done, and been. The construction discussed above should not be confused with an apparently identical I be busy. Here the be indicates that the action is habitual as opposed to a one time occurrence. These constructions also have different negative forms. The negative of the future tense structure I be here is I won't be here whereas the negative of the present tense habitual action sentence I be busy is I don't be busy.

In BE done is a sign of completed action, as in I done walk(ed) meaning 'I've finished walking already.'

Been in I been walk(ed) is a sign of remote time, and the sentence means 'I walked a long time ago.'

Questions

Distinctive interrogative forms are found in BE. Direct questions in SE beginning with a wh- question word require the helping verb to precede the subject whereas BE retains the usual statement form as,

Where can you go? SE
Where you can go? BE

On the other hand, indirect questions in SE beginning with a question word do not require the helping verb to precede the subject while BE permits the auxiliary to come before the subject, as in:

She asked what I was doing. SE
She asked what was I doing. BE

Finally indirect questions requiring if or whether in SE do not require these words in BE, thus:

I asked if (whether) I could go. SE
I asked could I go. BE

Indefinite Article

Some speakers of BE drop the an form altogether and use the a form in all instances, thus producing a apple and a X-ray.

It as an Expletive

Where SE uses there, as in There is a girl on the corner, BE uses it, as in It is a girl on the corner.

In this study I have not discussed such nonstandard features as double negatives, the occurrence of ain't, incorrect forms of personal pronouns and improper use of adjectives and adverbs because these features are found in many varieties of substandard English. Here again, I would not count these as errors in giving an IRI if they do not change the meaning of the sentence or passage because they usually indicate that the reader has internalized the printed words into his own speech patterns.

Checklist of BE Features

Does your student have any of the following features in his conversational speech?

Pronunciation

des for desk
coal for cold
dis for this
tin for thing
free for three
pin for pen
axe for ask
ball for boil
saw for sore
toc for tool
sod for side
god for guard

Grammar

he run for he runs
two dos for two dogs
John house for John's house
I runs for I run
two foots for two feet
two deses for two desks
testes for tests
She good for she's good
I be here for I'll be here or I'm always here
I done walked for I have finished walking already
He walkin' for he's walking
a apple for an apple
It's a train comin for there's a train coming

If the student demonstrates any of these features, give him discrimination tests for the others. For example, ask him if he hears the following words as being the same or different:

tes, test, tes
walks, walks, walk
free, three, free
dog, dog, dogs

Construct similar paradigms for the other features to get a better idea of his dialect. Once this is done, you are in a much better position to evaluate his reading errors.

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